

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 001398

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2016

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SUBJECT: EGYPT: DEMOCRACY ADVOCATE HALA MUSTAFA COMPLAINS OF GOE-INSPIRED MEDIA HARASSMENT

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) At a March 3 reception at Air Attaché's residence, Hala Mustafa, a participant in the Secretary's February 22 meeting with Civil Society leaders in Cairo, criticized the Embassy's failure to respond to press reporting on the civil society meeting. She said that she had been singled out for criticism in several Egyptian papers (pro-government Rose Al Youssef and independent weeklies Al Fagr and Al Mussawar. These were the kind of press attacks, she said, that the security services used to prepare the ground before arresting Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour. By "doing nothing," the Embassy exposed her to further criticism and more serious retaliation for expressing her views. DCM replied that an Embassy defense of Mustafa would make things worse, but assured her that we took her concerns seriously and promised to review with the Ambassador. Asked if she would like help with an extended tour in Washington at a think tank or university to let things "cool off," Mustafa said that she had standing offers.

¶2. (C) Comment: While the Secretary's meeting with civil society figures, including Mustafa, was covered in generally unfavorable tones in several Cairo papers, only pro-government Rose al-Youssef's front page article on February 24 constituted a harsh and personalized attack on Hala Mustafa. Independent weeklies, Al-Fagr and Al Mussawar, mentioned Mustafa but focused more negative attention on democracy advocates Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Hisham Kassem, who also criticized the GOE during the civil society meeting with the Secretary. End comment.

¶3. (C) Mustafa then challenged DCM on a mid-February Rose Al Youssef story, which reported that the Embassy had "investigated" her claims that she has been blackballed by Al Hurra Television. DCM replied that there had been no investigation, per se. Following her allegations in a 12/24 Washington Post editorial, the Embassy had contacted both her and Al Hurra to understand both sides of the story. In the end we were not persuaded that Al Hurra's Cairo staff had been co-opted by the state security services, as she had alleged. Al Hurra continued to feature harsh critics of the regime, including Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour. She herself had appeared on Al Hurra previously. (Note: Al Hurra producers in Cairo confirmed to public affairs staff in January that they now avoid programming Mustafa because she has arrived late for interviews and sometimes not at all and has been abusive with schedulers on the telephone.) Mustafa replied that she had every right to criticize Al Hurra in the Washington Post; DCM agreed, but wanted Mustafa to be aware that Al Hurra staff in Washington and State Dept colleagues had been taken aback by her claims against the television station.

¶4. (C) Comment: Ms. Mustafa's upset seems at odds with our invitation to her to join Secretary Rice's conversation with private Egyptian intellectuals last month, and VP Cheney's staff conversation the month before that. We agree that she is under pressure from certain press organs, encouraged, no doubt, by the security apparatus. Post will seek opportunities to impress on our GOE contacts that we regard as unacceptable such harassment of law-abiding private citizens who speak out for democracy. We particularly disapprove of apparent character-assassination campaigns in the state-influenced media against Ms. Mustafa and others who openly meet with American diplomats, up to the Secretary herself.

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